



F-35 Lightning II Program

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Italian Air Force Commander on How F-35 Will Transform the Service

By Tony Osborne, Aviation Week & Space Technology

Italy's challenging economic climate is perhaps not the most conducive for evolving an air force, yet the nation is now taking deliveries of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters (JSF), maritime patrol aircraft, jet trainers and new intelligence-gathering assets. Aviation Week London Bureau Chief Tony Osborne caught up with the Italian Air Force commander, Enzo Vecciarelli, to find out how this evolution is gaining pace.

What will the F-35 bring to the Italian Air Force? Gen. Vecciarelli: The F-35 is the aircraft suitable and necessary for new-generation scenarios. It is not just a fighter but also the best asset that can be used in a growing number of hybrid situations to achieve information superiority.

It seems that the F-35 is not a popular program with Italian politicians. How do you convince them of the aircraft's attributes? Our political leadership is aware of the importance of the JSF program and the tremendous enhancement this asset will bring to the capabilities of the defense ministry. Even when severe budget constraints forced a decrease in the number of acquisitions, Italy's participation in the program has never been in doubt.

When do you hope to declare the F-35 operational? We are on track to achieve initial operational capability (IOC) by the end of 2018. IOC depends upon several parameters. These include the appropriate number of aircraft being delivered to the operational units, the proper level of training and expertise for personnel and the software block upgrade that will enable us to employ the appropriate weapons for the assigned missions.

You are planning to host the first fifth-generation Tactical Leadership Program exercise at Amendola AB [to train NATO aircrews how to work better in a coalition operation]. Are other F-35 nations interested in the exercise? Because Amendola is the first European F-35 operational base, it is fully up to speed to host fifth-generation assets for deployment, exercises and real operations. Therefore, we have offered our partner nations the chance to perform the fourth 2018 TLP course over our territory. This represents the first opportunity in Europe to host training activities involving the F-35, fostering interoperability between fourth- and fifth-generation assets during complex and advanced missions. All the TLP-signing nations have shown great interest; there is an initial bidding [to take part in] the course for approximately 50 aircraft.

With four fighter types in the current inventory, what are the current plans for the various fleets? The Panavia Tornado and AMX will continue to be responsible for air-to-ground and reconnaissance missions for a few more years because they are able to cover several roles and operational scenarios, thanks to their ability to interoperate with coalition assets. The AMX will be phased out within the next three years and the Tornado in the late 2020s. Ultimately, the F-35 and F-2000 [Eurofighter] assets will cover the wide spectrum of our operational roles, from information superiority to kinetic capability.

Will the Typhoon receive an air-to-ground role? The Italian Air Force will soon achieve an operational capability in the air-to-ground role. This step forward will enable us to better manage the transition between third-generation assets [the Tornado and AMX] and fifth-generation [fighters]. When this transition process is completed, we will have two completely interoperable assets—the F-35 and F-2000—allowing us to cover and manage the full spectrum of challenging combat scenarios by choosing the best combination for any given operation.

What part does the AMX still play? As a cheap, robust and easily deployable asset for counterinsurgency, is it almost unique in Western Europe? The AMX has been demonstrating its value for years. The midlife-update version, ACOL [Italian for Operational and Logistics Capacity Update], has been employed in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq, where it has provided intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and air-to-ground support. It has proved to be capable, precise, reliable and affordable. We have therefore decided to extend its operational life until 2021, given the prolonged acquisition phase for the F-35 fleet.

What is your take on the future European fighter aircraft that France and Germany are contemplating building? We are following with interest the possible Franco-German joint venture to build a fifth-sixth-gen. fighter. For sure, the challenges will be extreme, but it could be a tremendous stimulus for the European aircraft industry. It will also be a long process involving several years and many resources. We need to think about fleet replacement, so a future European solution is definitely of interest.

What are the next steps in the Italian unmanned air vehicle (UAV)/unmanned combat air vehicle (UCAV) plan?

UAV systems are an extremely valuable asset of our airborne ISR enterprise. They contribute daily to build up and consolidate the information superiority required for modern scenarios.

We have several years' experience with the Predator A and B, which has allowed our air force to take a leading role in Europe in processing, fusing and disseminating the information from multiple ISR platforms—including the F-35. For the future, the air force is collaborating with Piaggio on the P.2HH project, and with other European partners for development of the next-generation medium-altitude long-endurance-Strategic-class UAV.

What are your plans with the new airborne early-warning Gulfstreams? Since Italy is already part of the NATO E-3 component, what role do these new Gulfstreams play? The CAEW [Conformal Airborne Early Warning] aircraft is a multisensor system able to address aerial surveillance as well as command, control and communications needs. These are fundamental in contributing to air supremacy and battle management. We plan an early-warning and command-and-control role for this asset, since it can be airborne with shorter tasking and employment times compared to the multinational AWACS. It is indispensable for national airspace surveillance, although it may help support NATO/EU or coalition needs.

Many other air forces face personnel retention and pilot shortages. Is this the same for Italy, and if so, how are you combating the situation? Pilot shortage seems to be widespread across many air forces, and we are not immune. So far, our selection process and in-house training capabilities allow us to retain an acceptable ratio between the fielding of newly trained pilots and the replacement of experienced ones who reach the end of their flying duties. The biggest challenge now is the need to train pilots for the new F-35 operational squadrons while maintaining operational capabilities on the other fighter components. We're focusing on an efficient training system that shortens [F-35] training time while allowing pilots to quickly become up to speed with the operational environments and complexity of the new information-management systems on the aircraft.

Alessandro Profumo, CEO of Leonardo, says his company wants to work more closely with the Italian Air Force on training and expanding the number of countries wanting to train in Italy. Can you provide more details? Our jet pilot training school, based at Lecce AB, home of the 61st Wing, comprises instructors and students from many nations as well as from NATO and other partners. The lead-in fighter training course, based on the new T-346 integrated training system, developed by Leonardo in close cooperation with us, is recognized worldwide. Such advanced training capabilities fit many partner countries' requirements, and foreign personnel have been increasingly involved in our training base: We host nine exchange instructor pilots and dozens of foreign students. These commitments, which are expected to grow, are a tangible proof of the quality and appreciation of our flight training.